

Critics concerned over non-binding fluoridation vote

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The great fluoride debate is set for 2010 municipal elections after regional councillors supported City of Waterloo's call for a plebiscite on water fluoridation last week.

It didn't happen without some disagreement over how that vote will be handled. There was some question whether it should be held under provisions of the Fluoride Act or under the Municipal Act.

In the end regional councillors decided to attach it to the municipal election ballot in 2010, and that it will be a non-binding vote. That raised some concerns about whether the will of the people would be respected by an incoming council, but regional councillors said moral persuasion will make sure that the results are respected.

And Waterloo regional Coun. Jane Mitchell said it is was the best way to save the taxpayers some money by attaching it to the municipal vote instead of holding a separate referendum.

"The cost of the plebiscite will be no more than the cost of the piece of paper to put the question on," said Mitchell. "That's one reason we're having it at election time."

But Robert Fleming of Waterloo Watch said he thinks the region is just trying to shirk some of its responsibility on the issue, including providing fluoridated water to neighbouring communities who never held a plebiscite in support of it like Waterloo. And in the case of Kitchener, they actually held a vote against fluoridation.

"I think this makes a mockery of the process to have a plebiscite that is not legally binding and doesn't follow the Fluoridation Act or the Municipal Election Act.

"Council can still accept this or reject this at their will, and the morning after an election can change their mind on it because they're not bound by the previous council."

Most of the work in support of the plebiscite will be handled by the local municipality, although the Region of Waterloo Health Department will run some of the pro-fluoridation argument on its website.

That drew the ire of some that asked whether the health department would put the opposing side on its website.

The first public debate on the newly struck fluoride question occurred later that night at a meeting of the Waterloo Community Council, representing Waterloo's neighbourhood associations. Doug Quibell, the region's manager of environmental health, confirmed the health department will not be hosting any opposing views on its site leaving the public to find information against fluoridation from other sites.

He said the health department still supports water fluoridation based on recommendations made by Health Canada and the Centres for Disease Control in the U.S. And despite saying that the health department will be neutral in the debate, that stand had people at the meeting questioning the regional department's impartiality.

The debate boiled down to a difference of opinion on the science of fluoridation and its effectiveness in preventing cavities.



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It left members of the WCC like Peter Mansell wondering if the debate won't be taken over by competing passions instead of being a debate on the facts.

But the fundamental facts in this case are in question. Quibell said there is a significant difference in the amount of cavities children have in fluoridated communities like Waterloo versus non-fluoridated ones like Kitchener. Carole Clinch, with People for Safe Drinking Water, argued socio-economic factors play an even bigger role with proper access to a dentist and the health insurance to pay for it accounting for most of the differences in the amount of dental carries.

Former city councillor Jim Bolger said the fluoride debate reminded him a lot of the recent pesticide debate, where the science on both sides was equally at odds. He said the biggest difference was that there was a political will to do something.

"What missing here is political will," said Bolger. "We have the science on both sides, what we don't have is the political will to act."

Bolger, who argued about the costs surrounding the application of fluoride and the campaign that will go into fighting it use, said it required some immediate action. "I think they should turn off the tap now," he said.

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